

THE RESURRECTION

Once we've established who Jesus claimed to be and what he claimed to have accomplished, the next obvious question to ask is: Is it all true? Was he really the son of God? Can he really answer the deepest questions of life? Can he rescue this world and undo our death? Paul, who wrote a big chunk of the New Testament, brought it all down to one critical question: If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. (1 Corinthians 15:14, New International Version)

The Bible claims that the world is wonderful but broken and that we're wonderful but broken. The reason the world is broken is because of sin and evil. The ultimate consequence of sin and evil is death. The creator's solution to his wonderful, broken world is to step into human history in the person of Jesus. In his torture and execution Jesus took on the power of sin and evil and experienced its last word, death. In his resurrection he overcame death, showing he'd overcome the power of sin and evil. If Jesus has overcome sin and evil, then he has the power to rescue this broken world. The Bible presents his resurrection as a foretaste of what he'll one day do for the whole world: raising it from sin, evil, decay and death. That's why the reality of the resurrection is so crucial to Christianity.

The central claim is that Jesus' resurrection isn't just a nice idea or a metaphor, but an actual, bodily event that happened in the first century. As with all past events, you can't investigate it with the tools of science but you can check out its credibility using the disciplines of history. In this introductory article we'll consider three aspects of the resurrection: the fact that it was totally unexpected, the eye-witness accounts we have, and possible alternative explanations.

THE UNEXPECTED RESURRECTION

To understand why the resurrection came as such a surprise to those around Jesus, we need to understand his cultural context. He was born as a Jew in the first century Roman Empire. The Empire at that time had been shaped by Greek culture and the idea of physical, bodily resurrection was a very negative one. Under the influence of Plato and others, the soul was seen as good, the part of you that was really you; and the body was seen as bad, a prison in which the soul was trapped. Death was viewed as the liberation of the soul from the body. Given this view, the Greeks were not looking for a bodily resurrection and they wouldn't have wanted one.

In Jewish culture there were different views about the resurrection. Some groups denied bodily resurrection altogether, seeing it as a dangerous and revolutionary idea. Others saw resurrection, particularly in the writings of the prophets, as a metaphor for Israel's liberation from Roman occupation, a final decisive end to their exile. Finally, many Jews believed that everyone would eventually be resurrected at the final great day of judgement to face the Lord. So in Jewish culture there were many who believed in bodily resurrection, especially those in contexts of persecution. However, there was no expectation of anyone being raised in advance of the final day. Resurrection was what would happen to everyone, or perhaps just Israel, on the final day.

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At the time of Jesus the Jews were looking for a messiah, one who would fulfil the promises of the Jewish scriptures. They were looking for a military leader, a warrior king in the mould of king David, who would judge and defeat their enemies, restore true worship to the temple, rule the nation with justice and bring in a new age of peace. The expectation was that the messiah would triumph over Israel's enemies, which they understood to be the Roman Empire rather than sin and evil. Death was the ultimate refutation of a messianic claim. There was no expectation that the messiah would die, let alone that he would be raised from the dead. A dead messiah was a contradiction in terms. If you were killed, as many failed messiah's were, you were clearly not the messiah.

If you were making up a messiah, your messiah wouldn't die and be raised from the dead. That would be sure to alienate both Jews and Greeks. Yet, with hindsight, if the real enemy was not Rome but the power of sin and evil, then death and resurrection actually makes great sense. You wouldn't have seen it coming, but looking back it's the unforeseen twist that makes perfect sense of the plot.

THE EYEWITNESS ACCOUNTS

There are accounts of Jesus' resurrection in each of the four gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Scholars agree that the account in Mark's gospel is truncated, the final verses having been lost. Then there's an autobiographical account of the conversion of Paul after his alleged encounter with the risen Jesus in the book of Acts. That account is summarised in the first letter to the Corinthians.

Matthew and John are believed to have been two of Jesus' closest disciples. Mark and Luke were very close associates respectively of Peter (another of Jesus' closest disciples) and Paul (mentioned earlier). In other words, they were in a position to know exactly what actually happened. Because of the number of early copies we have of the documents, we know that what we now have was what they originally wrote (with the exception of the final verses of Mark). Literary and archaeological evidence suggests that the gospels were written down much earlier than was previously thought, Matthew, Mark and Luke by 70AD, within the lifetime of many of the actual eyewitnesses.

When it comes to the passages reporting the resurrection they're clearly very early oral sources reported with little editorial shaping. Firstly, there's been no attempt to harmonize all the details. Some see this as a problem, but this is exactly what you would expect from eyewitnesses who had seen something extraordinary and were in a state of shock and astonishment. Secondly, the first witnesses to the resurrection were women. In that culture, the testimony of a woman would have been regarded as much less reliable than the testimony of a man. We can be sure that the events would not have been recorded in this way unless that was the way things actually what happened. Thirdly, the accounts of the resurrection, particularly Matthew, Mark and Luke, contain much less theological reflection than the rest of the gospels. They present the facts and leave the reader to work out the implications. They appear to be the unadorned record of very early oral testimonies.

So those who wrote the accounts of Jesus' life, death and resurrection were in a position to know what actually happened, the record we have is what they originally wrote and the accounts of the resurrection are minimally edited records of very early oral accounts of those who were witnesses. Of Jesus' inner circle of disciples all but John were martyred for their testimony about Jesus' resurrection and John was exiled. They knew whether or not it was true and they all gave their lives for claiming that Jesus had been bodily raised from the dead. That's a the ultimate test of a witness.

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CONVINCING ALTERNATIVES

In its early days, the church was a tiny group within the vast Roman Empire. Around 50 years after Jesus' death it was heavily persecuted by the Romans for giving its allegiance to Jesus before Caesar and by the Jews who saw it as a threat to their ancestral traditions. Following the example of Jesus, the early Christians refused to take up arms, engage in a guerilla war or lower their public profession of faith. Instead they carried out sacrificial acts of love and service and within 400 years, this subversive revolution of love and sacrifice, had won over the Roman Empire. The martyrdom of a leader has often lead to great wars and revolutions, but it's remarkably difficult to account for a revolution of sacrifice and love without the reality of the resurrection.

Jesus was not the only one who claimed to be the messiah at that time. Another was Simon bar Giora in 70 AD. He led a massive revolt against the Roman occupation which was crushed by Vespasian. Simon was bought to Rome where he was killed with great ceremony as recorded by the historian Josephus, the ultimate public demonstration of the Roman victory.

NT Wright in his epic book, *The Resurrection of the Son of God*, invites us to imagine Simon's followers, perhaps hiding in a cave or cellar. One of them suggests that in spite of all that had happened, Simon really was the messiah. The others would probably have assumed he'd gone mad, or that he was being very ironic, i.e. God had abandoned them. If he pressed the point, suggesting that they should launch a movement proclaiming that Simon had established God's kingdom and brought freedom and peace and that Simon was the true Lord of the whole world, they may think he was dangerously insane. And if he backed this up by claiming "he had received a vision of Simon being with him; that he had a strong sense that Israel's God had forgiven them for their failure to support him properly; that he had enjoyed a wonderful and heart warming spiritual experience as he thought about the death of Simon..." he would have been greeted derision or sorrowful shaking of the heads. It's difficult to account for the significance attributed to the death of Jesus by his first followers and the emergence of the church without the fact of the resurrection.

CONCLUSION

Bringing together the different strands we've considered: Firstly, we've seen that with hindsight, the death and resurrection of Jesus make excellent sense of the plot of the Bible, but at the same time it's not the kind of ending you would make up. It's an unexpected twist and reshapes so many Jewish and Greek expectations that it would not be well received by either group unless they were convinced that the resurrection of Jesus had really happened. Secondly, the eye-witness accounts are highly credible. We know that what we have was what they originally wrote, that they were in a position to know what had actually happened and that they gave their lives standing by their claims about Jesus. We also have strong grounds for believing that the resurrection accounts themselves are the records of the oral testimonies of those who witnessed the events first hand. Thirdly, we've suggested it's very difficult to account what happened in the early church without the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus. Historical enquiry can never provide 100% proof, however, this introduction to the question aims to show that the historical case for the resurrection is robust and alternative explanations are problematic.

